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## COMMUNITY VOICES

# Should Public Libraries be Welcoming Homes for Ingenuity?

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By Phil Shapiro, | DEC 31, 2008 5:19 AM PST

Helene Blowers is the Digital Initiatives Librarian for the Columbus Metropolitan Library in Columbus, Ohio. I follow her [Library Bytes blog](#) because of the vibrancy of her thinking and ideas. She recently gave a talk at the [Boulder Public Library](#), in Boulder, Colorado. Scroll down on her blog to view the slideshare of her Dec. 5, 2008 talk. (Click onto the slideshare to activate it and then move forward and backwards thru the slideshare using the left and right arrow keys on your keyboard.)

She's talking about playfulness and creativity and public libraries. Her talk got me thinking a lot about this and related topics. And in my wondering I asked myself

these questions: What is the connection between creativity and playfulness? And then what is the connection between creativity and ingenuity? And then what is the connection between ingenuity and public libraries?

Public libraries are about books, right? Yes, books. And something other than books, too. Public libraries are physical homes for the human imagination. The human imagination is represented physically in books, but also in the things we build and make. The media we make. The contraptions we devise. The songs we compose. The art we make.

Traditionally, we haven't thought of public libraries as "houses of ingenuity," but maybe that's the direction in which they're headed. Maybe people will start heading over to the public library because they've been wondering about something. And they want to talk to a library staffer who is good at soldering, or is good at [Google SketchUp](#), or is handy at prototyping, or who likes to build [solar charged lawn mowers](#), or has incredible talent at [making a cat feeder from a VCR](#), or who is excellent at [animation using free software](#).

Maybe ingenuity belongs in public libraries. And guess what? Ingenuity doesn't go home on Fridays at 6 pm. Ingenuity stays up late Friday evening and way into Saturday morning because ingenuity is so close to getting it right. Ingenuity is working with neighbors in a community building in a way that's never been done before. Figuring things out, solving problems, bringing value to each other via a process. Within a library. Via a process.

And ingenuity is intergenerational, because the kids always have the best ideas. And the kids learn to listen and respect one another, because that is ingenuity's way. And some teenager mutters to her friend on her way to school, "There is no place I'd rather be than at the public library. No place. If I could move in there, I would." And she's carrying a wrench in her hands when she says this. On her tee-shirt is the question: "What do you know about Nikola Tesla?"

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And ingenuity is all about art and design. So if you've got a question about art or design, go ask someone who works at the library. They're expert at materials and design tools and color. They can talk to you for hours about design. There in your public library, where ingenuity lives.

And ingenuity lives there seven days a week because the meeting rooms have external doors that are accessible when the library itself is closed. Except the library itself is never closed, unless your mind is closed. And on the front door of the library is a sign that says: This library is open whenever your mind is.

And dramatic skits and plays are written and performed within the same night inside the library space. From 7 pm to 9 pm the skit or play gets collaboratively written using the free [EtherPad](#) web site and five wireless laptops. From 9 pm to 10 pm it gets rehearsed. From 10 pm to 11 pm it gets performed. Every week. On a different theme covering matters of interest and relevance to the community.

And music gets composed. Within the library. Every week. In a wide range of musical styles using a wide range of musical instruments. So children can see music and lyrics being assembled before their eyes. And the musicians are respectful of one another, because that's music's way. And some little kid asks, "Can I try playing the bass?" And some six foot eight bass player says, "Sure, I'll show you how. I'll play up here and you pluck the strings down there."

And some twelve year old kid goes up to a medical doctor and challenges her to a competitive game of [Freerice](#). The doctor says, "Hey kid, you think you know more vocabulary than I do?" And the kid replies, "Ma'am, I believe I do." And the doctor ends up eating some humble pie because the kid knows more vocabulary than the professional adult.

And then the kid asks the doctor, "Tell me about some of your favorite books?" And the doctor says, "Sure, let me tell you about some of my favorite books." Because libraries are good places to talk about books. Right?

And on the way home, the doctor tells her husband, "I never thought I'd ever experience that much in a single evening at the public library." And the husband says, "Well, you always told me that creativity and playfulness are really the same thing. And ingenuity is the first cousin of creativity. And the people who designed our new library, they wanted to design a welcoming home for ingenuity."

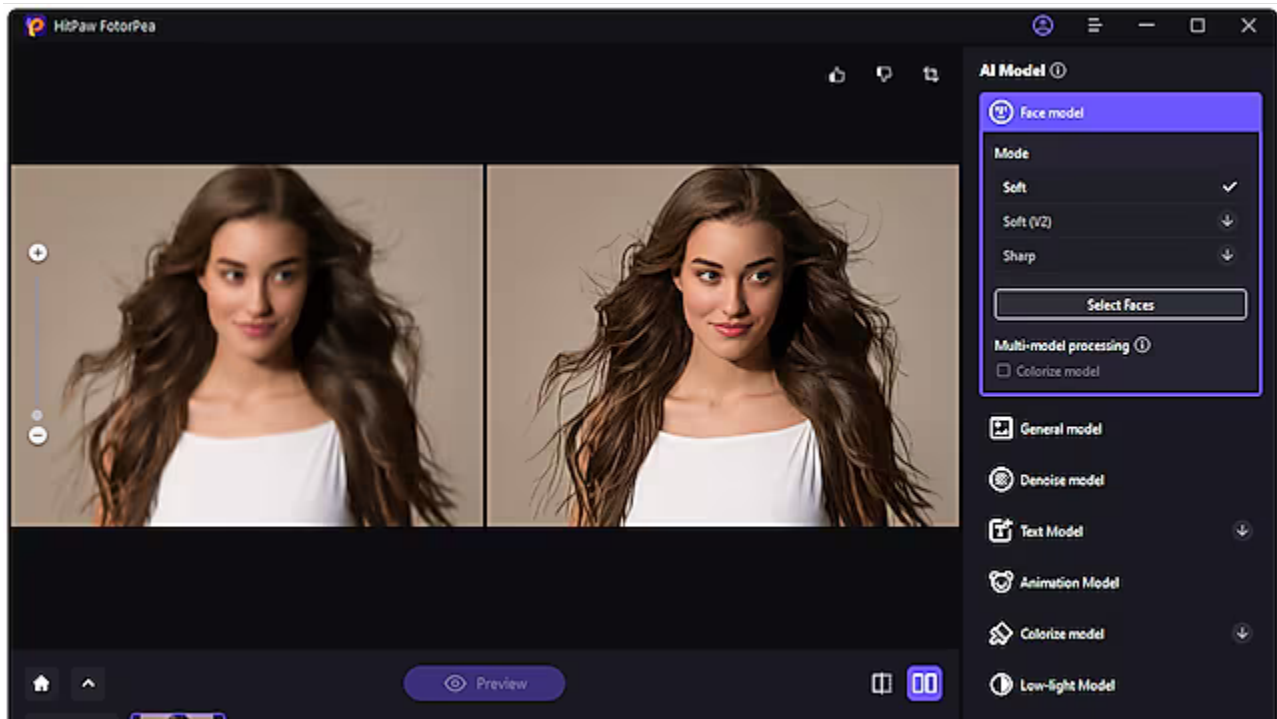
And the doctor then asks, "Are the people who designed our new library architects?" And the husband replies, "No, the people who designed our new library are [us](#). The machine is us."

"How did we make it happen?" she says. "We made it happen because we wanted to make it happen," he says.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Do you think TJ, the founder of the Library of Congress, would approve?"



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"TJ would love it. Trust me. TJ would love it. His wife would need to drag him home."

"Like you're dragging me home tonite?"

"Like I'm dragging you home tonite."

### [Phil Shapiro](#)

The author works as the public geek at the Takoma Park Maryland Library, and is an adjunct professor of education at American University. In high school he built a hot water solar collector from an abandoned shopping cart and hauled it up onto the roof of his house with a rope. His parents thought that was a good idea. The neighbors were not entirely thrilled with the shopping cart. On the roof. Of the house.

Now go back and read Helene Blowers slideshare on creativity and playfulness and public libraries. She is telling us something, I do believe. Do you think so?



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